

# Making the Most of Our Investments:

**How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start**



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# Introduction

## Closing the Achievement Gap by Aligning PK-3 Systems

Gaps in academic achievement between students from various racial and ethnic groups and from low-income families are a cause for national concern. The advent of high stakes testing and the increased awareness of high dropout rates have rekindled the search for ways to help all children succeed in school. Many strategies to address lagging achievement have focused on discrete points of the education system, such as middle and high school reform. However, there is an increasing interest and movement by educators and grantmakers to confront the problem where it often starts—between the ages of three and eight—and to take a systems approach that aligns learning from pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through third grade (PK-3).

Research suggests that one-third of children enter kindergarten lacking basic skills such as recognizing the letters of the alphabet. Research has also found that these are the same children who will be at greatest risk of joining the 30 percent of students who drop out before graduating from high school.

There is a growing body of evidence that validates the impact of an aligned, coordinated PK-3 system on children's learning and development. Long-term studies comparing outcomes of aligned PK-3 systems with unaligned models show that children participating in PK-3 systems have increased math, reading and social skills, among an array of other benefits.

Growing numbers of elementary schools also recognize the advantages of aligning instructionally with pre-kindergarten programs. By working together, pre-kindergarten and elementary programs can significantly increase efforts that smooth the transition and prepare children to enter school ready to learn. The PK-3 programs that result have aligned curricula to ensure that every student leaves each grade with the appropriate social, emotional and academic skills they need to succeed in the next grade.

Although aligning pre-K through third grade sounds straightforward, there are many curricular details, systemic challenges and funding intricacies that make PK-3 program integration a complex process. Grantmakers for Education brought together grantmakers, educators and advocates for a two-day briefing entitled *Making the Most of Our Investments: How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start*. Presentations, group discussions and a site visit addressed the following key issues:

- The research and policy context for PK-3 systems
- Strategies for successfully aligning pre-kindergarten with the K-3 system
- PK-3 alignment in action—what does it look like on the ground?
- Advancing PK-3 systems through grantmaking—what are the leverage points for funders?

Because the PK-3 approach is a relatively new educational strategy, the meeting tried to provide grantmakers with the background to

begin incorporating some of the principles of aligned PK-3 education into their grantmaking activities. Discussions elicited many promising ideas to help grantmakers better leverage their funding, as well as some important questions that have not yet been answered.

This report is a compendium of the knowledge, strategies and insights shared by meeting presenters and participants. It is organized in four sections:

- **Understanding the PK-3 Landscape** provides a high-level look at what a PK-3 system is, the case for PK-3 alignment provided by the research, and the policy landscape that affects implementation of aligned PK-3 systems.
- **PK-3 Alignment in Practice** outlines the key elements of a quality PK-3 system, discusses the critical issues around establishing and sustaining a PK-3 system and addresses challenges and opportunities in implementation.
- **Grantmaker Engagement** highlights grantmaking strategies for PK-3.
- **What's Needed in the Future** outlines some of the considerations that briefing participants think grantmakers and the PK-3 movement need to address to achieve success on a larger scale.

It will take dedication and hard work to bring PK-3 systems to scale, but one thing was clear during this briefing: the commitment needed to carry the effort forward is in place.

“Our worst enemy is feeling overwhelmed by the massiveness of the problem and challenges.”  
—Meeting participant

# I. Understanding the PK-3 Landscape

## What Is a PK-3 System?

Young children grow and change at a rapid rate in their earliest years and benefit from an education that evolves with these changes, providing new challenges at every stage. A PK-3 system acknowledges this growth, and brings two disparate systems—pre-K and the first years of primary education—into alignment. A well-aligned PK-3 system provides children in their formative years with the foundation needed to perform well in their early years and beyond: confidence, effective communication skills, foundational reading and math skills, as well as an eagerness to learn. The key is sequential curricula that build on children’s cognitive and social development as they move from pre-K up to third grade, offering a continuum of learning in a consistent environment.

A fully-implemented PK-3 approach includes the following elements:

- Aligned curriculum, standards and assessments across grades PK-3
- Consistent instructional approaches and learning environments
- Pre-K available for all 3- and 4-year olds; full-day kindergarten
- Teachers in all classrooms possess at least a BA, and are certified to teach children in grades PK-3
- Partnership between the school and families with active parent engagement
- Small class sizes

## What PK-3 Is Not

While many pre-K and Head Start programs might feed into a particular school, or might be housed onsite with a school’s K-3 program, co-location alone doesn’t ensure an integrated PK-3 approach. K-3 staff often have little or no relationship with the pre-K teacher or director, or, if pre-K is provided onsite, the relationship tends to be about space sharing, not collaboration and aligned curricula. If there is no collaborative effort among pre-K, kindergarten and first through third grade teachers to establish a curriculum that is aligned and builds progressively, the model is not a PK-3 approach.

## Making the Case for PK-3 Systems

Research shows that the education system is faced with a number of problems that result from children not being prepared to learn. Studies clearly show that learning to learn begins at an early age. Outcomes of children participating in aligned PK-3 systems demonstrate that the approach is a viable strategy to address the problems children face in learning. At the briefing, researchers and grantmakers outlined a compelling rationale for aligning education from grades PK-3, which is outlined below.

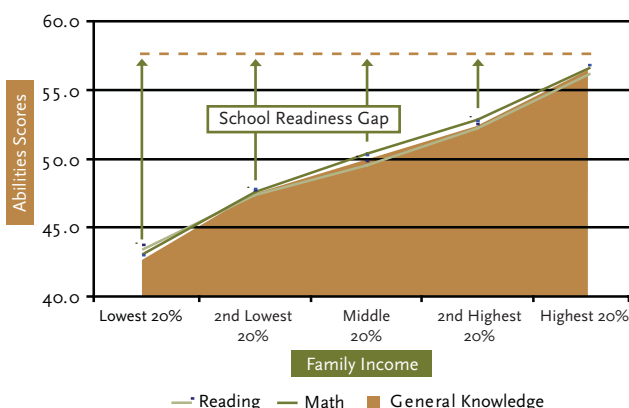


### Children are entering kindergarten unprepared.

Research has found that one-third of middle-class children, and nearly one-half of low-income children, don't recognize the letters of the alphabet upon entering kindergarten. Studies show that by high school, it is these children who are at greater risk of getting into trouble or dropping out. This lack of school readiness is present among children of all classes, but is more prevalent among children of lower socioeconomic status.

#### Abilities of Entering Kindergarteners by Family Income

National Data, Fall 1998 (reported by NIEER from ECLS-K)



1 Juel, Connie (1988). Learning to read and write: A longitudinal study of 54 children from first through fourth grades. Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol 80, 437-447.

2 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002. Reading Highlights. Retrieved from web site, November 2003, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2002/2003524.pdf>

### Children who start behind stay behind.

Research shows that children who start behind too often stay behind:

- Of 50 first graders having problems reading, 44 will still have problems in the fourth grade.<sup>1</sup>
- Only 12% of children who start behind will show improvement.

### A majority of school children are not proficient in basic reading skills.

Nationally, 69% of fourth graders, 67% of eighth graders and 64% of twelfth graders are below proficient levels of reading.<sup>2</sup>

### Pre-K or Head Start alone do not provide sustained learning gains.

Although research has shown that pre-K and Head Start participation can increase achievement, when these children progress through grades K-3 in low-resource schools, their initial gains in reading and math scores may diminish. Children who participate in an aligned PK-3 program show sustained gains in reading and math.

## HEAD START

Head Start and Early Head Start are comprehensive child development programs that serve children from birth to age five, pregnant women and their families. They are child-focused programs and have the overall goal of increasing the school readiness of young children in low-income families.

Head Start can be part of PK-3 systems. But the various policies governing the program pose unique challenges to integrating it with an elementary school. Although federally funded, Head Start is locally or regionally controlled, resulting in wide variation of quality and implementation.

Head Start may be provided onsite at elementary schools, yet not be controlled by the principal, or it might be provided offsite and closely coordinated with the school to ensure alignment. One of the challenges of aligning Head Start with grades K-3 and creating a cohesive staff is the differential in pay and certification requirements that exists between Head Start providers and K-3 teachers.

### **Evidence suggests that participation in an aligned PK-3 program enhances the effects of pre-K and kindergarten.**

Studies show that aligned PK-3 systems help sustain the gains of pre-K and kindergarten programs that may otherwise “fade out” as children progress through grades K-3 in low-resource schools.

### **Aligned PK-3 systems can narrow the achievement gap and enhance children’s learning.**

A quality, aligned PK-3 system is a prevention and promotion model of learning. Studies show that quality PK-3 systems can:

- Increase social readiness, literacy and math skills
- Promote better, smoother transitions between grades
- Help at-risk children develop and achieve, ultimately narrow the achievement gap
- Reduce learning disabilities of all types, and lessen the need for special education as children progress through the PK-12 system
- Promote learning, resulting in higher reading and math achievement all along a child’s educational path



**Children who participate in high-quality aligned PK-3 systems perform better on 3rd grade reading and math test scores.**

Studies show that children in an aligned PK-3 system with full day kindergarten do better on math and reading assessments than their peers without pre-K or in unaligned programs. Results are even stronger for children in aligned PK-3 systems that also include a high-level of parental involvement, reading instruction, and exclusive use of certified teachers.

**Investments in aligned PK-3 systems provide significant economic returns.**

A comparative study of the economic returns of early learning models found that Chicago's aligned PK-3 system of Child Parent Centers (CPCs) provide a \$10.15 return on every dollar invested. The CPCs offer a fully aligned curriculum combined with health and social services, and experiences a high rate of parental involvement. In contrast, the Abecedarian Project, an unaligned model, provides only a \$3.78 return on every dollar invested.

**ECONOMIC RETURNS OF CHILD PROGRAMS**

Program	Return per \$1 invested
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	\$10.15
High/Scope Perry Pre-K	\$8.74/\$17.07
Abecedarian	\$3.78
Women Infants & Children Program (WIC)	\$3.07
Big Brothers/Big Sisters	\$1.01
Job Corps	\$1.32

Source: Arthur Reynolds, "PK-3 Education: Review of Findings and Recommendations." Presentation delivered May 18, 2006.

## THE EARLIEST PK-3 EXPERIMENT: CHICAGO'S CHILD-PARENT CENTERS

### Community Roots

The PK-3 approach has its roots in Chicago's system of Child-Parent Centers (CPCs). CPCs were designed to be small learning communities that offer engaging learning experiences for children and helped connect parents to a network of community resources, as well as to other parents. Today, CPCs continue to provide a place in the community where children can come to learn and play for six years of their lives—from ages three through eight. In addition to a strategically aligned curriculum, CPCs offer comprehensive social and health services to families, and embody the family-school partnership concept.

### CPC Elements

- Pre-K and kindergarten are provided onsite, often across the hall from one another, providing a high level of continuity.
- Classes are small with low teacher-to-student ratios.
- Curricula are aligned within and across grades, and have a basic-skills focus: language, listening and numbers.
- First through third grade environments are similar to pre-K and kindergarten environments.
- Each class has a parent teacher and resource teacher.
- Significant communication between teachers, parents and children creates a community-like environment.
- Parents are highly involved.

- Schools have a parent resource room and offer classes to parents.
- Health and family support services are provided to children and their families.
- Services and support are provided by community representatives, classroom aides, nurses, psychologists and social workers.
- Each elementary school principal serves as manager and authority of the CPC program at their school.
- A head teacher is responsible for each program component and reports to the principal.

### CPC Outcomes

A study of aligned and unaligned PK-3 systems in Chicago showed that children who attended CPCs had higher reading test scores compared with those who attended unaligned programs. The study also demonstrated the important role of pre-K: children who had no pre-K and started in kindergarten experienced a period of accelerated learning, but did not keep up with other CPC children who started in pre-K; and their achievement dropped significantly after third grade.

Overall, achievement gains were seen in CPC children through age 15; grade retention, special education cases and child maltreatment rates all improved with CPC attendance. Also, fewer CPC attendees were arrested for violent crimes, and experienced greater

*Continued on the next page*

fulltime employment as adults compared to individuals who did not attend CPCs.

To learn more about CPC and other PK-3 model outcomes, read the following reports:

“PK-3 Education: Programs and Practices that Work in Children’s First Decade.” By Arthur Reynolds, University of Minnesota, and others. FCD Working Paper: Advancing PK-3 no. 6. (Foundation for Child Development,

New York, New York) January 2006. Available at: <http://www.fcd-us.org/pdfs/PK-3EducationProgramsandPracticesthatWork.pdf>

“PK-3: What Is It and How Do We Know It Works?” By Bill Graves. FCD Policy Brief: Advancing PK-3 no. 4. (Foundation for Child Development, New York, New York) May 2006. Available at: [www.fcd-us.org/PDFs/GravesBrief.pdf](http://www.fcd-us.org/PDFs/GravesBrief.pdf)

## INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS:

### The New School Foundation Partners with Seattle Public Schools

Located on the edge of a low-income and ethnically diverse community in Seattle, Wash., the New School at South Shore is a powerfully effective public school. While almost half of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 98% of all second-graders read at grade level or higher as measured on the district's standardized reading assessment in Spring 2007. Ninety percent or more of low-income second-graders and all ethnic subgroups are reading at grade level. The school's students reflect the diversity of the Rainier Beach neighborhood in which the school is located: ethnic representation is 45% African-American, 30% Asian, 15% white and 9% Latino.

The New School's accomplishments in promoting success for all students—regardless of race or socioeconomic status—are assisted by a 10-year partnership between Seattle Public Schools and the New School Foundation, which played a hands-on role helping to launch the school and establish its PK-3 program. The foundation's original concept was to invest deeply in the early years at an elementary school as a means of prevention, rather than investing in intervention activities in the later years—and the partnership grew from there.

The partnership at the New School evolved from the New School Foundation's earlier investment to establish a PK-3 program at T.T. Minor Elementary School, a struggling school

in another low-income Seattle neighborhood. In 2001, the New School Foundation came to the district with an offer to replicate the work at T.T. Minor at another school. The district and the foundation agreed to do so at a newly-established school, which afforded the opportunity to build the program and culture from the ground up. They jointly hired a dynamic seasoned principal, Gary Tubbs, and the foundation paid his salary for a year of planning to design and launch the new school—an investment that the partners have hailed as essential to the school's success.

The New School opened in the fall of 2002 with 102 pre-K and kindergarten students. Each year, the school adds a cohort, growing over time to become a PK-8 school. In the current 2007-08 school year, the school serves 356 students in pre-K through 5th grades.

The New School incorporates many elements of a PK-3 approach, including:

- A voluntary, free pre-K program that is fully integrated into the school's overall program; 80% of pre-K students matriculate into the school's kindergarten.
- Alignment of the High/Scope curriculum used in pre-K and kindergarten with the district's K-3 literacy program. Teachers at all grade levels have been trained in High/Scope methods to promote alignment.

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- Small class sizes at all grade levels, with one-on-one acceleration support for struggling learners.
- Home visits to build relationships between teachers and families before school starts.
- Activities and resources to support the whole child, including daily arts and physical education and a comprehensive wellness program.
- Extended learning opportunities, with academically-integrated before-/after-school and intersession programs available to all students, through tuition or scholarships.

The school's approach emphasizes getting to know each child and his or her family deeply and capitalizing on that intimacy. Teachers know the kids and their families very well, so they can intervene quickly when issues arise, individualize instruction and dig deeper to accelerate learning.

While the foundation has enriched the New School's offerings well beyond the standard Seattle elementary school budget

(the foundation's support totaled \$1.4 million in the 2006-07 school year), the school's total per-pupil spending was \$15,203 in 2006-07—a figure that is within the range of public spending in several well-funded urban districts. The foundation's investments, which are structured to avoid supplanting public funds, have provided many of the enhancements that allow the school to individualize instruction, build partnerships with families and nurture the whole child.

Teachers and families place a high value on the program because of the results they've seen. The school's results from Washington's statewide assessment, the "WASL", which was first taken by last year's 3rd-graders, came in above district and state averages, and were especially high for low-income students, who comprised half of the test takers: 79% of low-income students surpassed the WASL reading standard, compared to 50% for the district as a whole. In math, 68% of the New School's low-income third graders surpassed the WASL standard, compared to 49% in the district as a whole. With these results, the staff and community are hooked.

## The PK-3 Policy Landscape

Most of the public is not cognizant of the PK-3 approach, as it is still in its infancy despite its long history in some communities. For this reason, the current early childhood policy landscape is focused on pre-K, rather than on PK-3 programs. The growing movement to adopt voluntary, high-quality pre-K programs can set the stage for a PK-3 movement, since a PK-3 approach can help states and districts to leverage their investments in pre-K. In addition, the pressure of No Child Left Behind—particularly its emphasis on meeting reading and math standards starting in third grade—provides a ripe opportunity for making an urgent case for investing in and developing PK-3 programs.

### **Pre-K enrollment is rising.**

Nationally, enrollment in pre-K or kindergarten increased from 61% to 68% of three-year olds and from 73% to 82% of four-year olds between 1991 and 1999.<sup>3</sup> While a larger percentage of children of working parents attend pre-K or kindergarten, enrollment increased for children of both working and stay-at-home mothers at the same rate.<sup>4</sup>

### **Investments in pre-K are growing.**

States are investing more dollars in pre-K programs. Increased pre-K funding is important because having strong pre-K programs can be the first step toward integration and alignment with K-3. Between 2004 and 2006, almost \$1 billion new dollars have been invested in pre-K by state governments. Fifteen states in 2004 and 26 states in 2005 increased pre-K funding.<sup>5</sup>

## **There's a growing movement for universal pre-K.**

States are at different levels of providing universal pre-K implementation, but more are making it a priority:

- Thirty-eight states offer some form of publicly funded pre-K.
- Georgia, New York, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Massachusetts, North Carolina and Florida offer universal pre-K.
- Governors in Washington, New Mexico and Kentucky are working to increase pre-K funding or establish universal pre-K programs.
- Illinois recently created a universal pre-K program—however, when demand exceeds capacity, admission will be prioritized by various eligibility requirements, such as the level at which they are academically at-risk.
- In lieu of California's Proposition 82, which would have created universal pre-K, Governor Schwarzenegger has proposed spending \$145 million over the next three years to expand pre-K access for four-year-olds in low-performing districts; the plan is viewed by advocates as a foundation on which to build. Twenty-nine states have "targeted" free pre-K programs that serve children who meet various eligibility requirements, such as family income, residence in a low-income school district, English language learner status, born to single or teen parents, or disability.

<sup>3</sup> National Household Education Survey

<sup>4</sup> National Institute for Early Education Research ([www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org))

<sup>5</sup> Pre-k Now ([www.preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org))



**Despite pre-K enrollment and funding gains, limited resources and complex funding mechanisms prevent large-scale P K-3 implementation.**

Significant resources are required to establish and sustain PK-3 programs, but finding and navigating the right combination of funding sources is an arduous process. Each state has its own complex process for passing funding legislation, and each has its own policies governing participation in pre-K and kindergarten. State-level complexities and the variations across states make large-scale implementation challenging.

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provides an opportunity to educate and advocate for the PK-3 approach.**

NCLB's focus on closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all students meet educational standards has created a sense of urgency that can build support for more widespread adoption of a PK-3 approach. In particular, NCLB's stipulations that schools demonstrate adequate yearly progress on student test scores beginning in grade three, creates an impetus for schools to identify how to bring young children up to grade level. When the legislation is reauthorized in 2007, PK-3 advocates have an opportunity to send a message of urgency about the need to create a strong academic foundation in the early years through aligned PK-3 programs. It will be an opportunity to focus attention on and increase awareness of the PK-3 approach and its confirmed outcomes, as well as to increase the size and flexibility of Title I funds that schools can use to establish PK-3 programs.

## II. PK-3 Alignment in Practice

Throughout the briefing, participants identified a number of key elements that represent an aligned PK-3 system. In addition, participants identified important considerations that arise when implementing an aligned approach. These issues are discussed below.

### Key Elements of a PK-3 System

Curricular alignment is the defining element of the PK-3 approach. A growing body of research suggests that children in educational programs with aligned curricula and standards between pre-K and third grade make stronger and more sustained gains in learning. However, what other elements contribute to making a quality PK-3 system? The briefing aimed to answer this question, and identified the following key elements as part of the ideal, quality PK-3 system.

- Participation in onsite pre-K by all three- and four-year-old children
- Curricular alignment within each grade and between grades, with teachers knowing what is expected of children entering and leaving the grade they teach
- Full-day kindergarten
- Consistency in instruction and the learning environment within and across grades, providing children in different classes with similar experiences and a consistent set of expectations as they progress
- High-quality, degreed staff with specialized training in early learning or the grade they teach

- Coordination among teachers in the same and different grades, with time allotted to do so
- High level of parent engagement in the classroom
- Small class sizes

### Key Considerations for Implementing a PK-3 System

In addition to providing a clearer picture of what a quality PK-3 system looks like, briefing participants discussed the important issues around establishing and sustaining it. Solutions are still being sought to some of the challenges that impede the PK-3 approach. The key issues below are intended to bring awareness to these challenges and to illustrate some of the best practices now in place.

#### Professional Development

In a high-quality PK-3 system, teachers and staff dedicate time to coming together for the purpose of discussing and understanding each child, and collaborating on aligning curricula within and across grades. Through this process, teachers learn from each other and improve their instructional skills.

Professional development for principals and superintendents is just as important as it is for teachers. Successful PK-3 systems tend to have leaders with experience at the classroom level who recognize that the PK-3 approach is important. Many principals and superintendents have limited exposure to PK-3 programs, so it's important to find ways to provide them with direct, in-the-classroom experience.

### **Pre-K Siting**

Continuity of place is important in the social development of children and, thus, as an aspect of the PK-3 approach. While pre-K delivered offsite can still be effectively aligned to a K-3 system, it provides more challenges than if it is located onsite with K-3.

A common misconception held by parents is that onsite pre-K is less intimate and more academic, and thus detrimental to their child's development. Offsite pre-K can provide a desirable and intimate setting, but onsite pre-Ks can do the same, and also offer continuity of place combined with a balanced, playful and aligned curriculum.

### **Teacher Quality, Pay and Retainment**

Teacher quality at all levels within a PK-3 system is important. However, the pay scale and qualification requirements are usually lower for pre-K teachers than for K-3 teachers. These differentials make it challenging to retain highly qualified pre-K teachers and build a cohesive PK-3 team.

Attempts are being made by the National Association for the Education of Young Children to ensure the quality of early childhood teachers by changing accrediting standards to require that by 2020 all pre-K teachers have a B.A., but

“All the research shows that quality matters; and the most effective piece is teacher qualifications and that’s the hardest piece”

—Sue Urahn, Pew Charitable Trusts

this will have little effect unless the issue of adequate pay is addressed.

### **Balancing Academic and Developmental Learning**

Some parents express concern that pre-K as part of a PK-3 system will emphasize the academic over the emotional, social and developmental needs of children. They fear their young children will sit at a desk doing mundane pencil tasks. Acknowledging a culture difference between pre-K and elementary education, some parents resist sending their child to a pre-K program that is part of a larger K-12 system. However, a good PK-3 system balances the developmental and academic needs of young children at each age level. Involving parents at the school site can help overcome reluctance to turning their children's social development over to the school.

### **Funding**

Identifying, leveraging and effectively using resources to fund PK-3 systems is a challenge. Pre-K and K-12 each have their own funding mechanisms run out of different state and federal funding streams, which can serve as a deterrent to establishing a PK-3 system. Many administrators fail to realize that some common funding sources, such as Title I funds, are flexible and can be used to bridge pre-K and K-3 approaches. The challenge lies in understanding the restrictions on funds from different sources, and how different pools of money can be redistributed. Administrators that don't see the benefits of PK-3 alignment may be reluctant to redirect funds from more traditional K-12 programs.

## TITLE I FUNDING

“Title I” funding began with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and is intended to help ensure that all children have the opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach grade-level proficiency. Title I funds go to school districts with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help students who are behind academically or at risk of falling behind. Services can include: hiring teachers to reduce class size, tutoring, computer labs, parental involvement activities, professional development, purchase of materials and supplies, pre-kindergarten programs, and hiring teacher assistants or others. Title I funds serve about 12.5 million students, from pre-K through high school. Funding is determined by four criteria based on census poverty data and state education costs.

Schools must focus Title I services on children who are failing, or most at risk of failing, to meet state academic standards. However, schools with 40 percent or more of students from low-income families are eligible to use

Title I funds for all their students by achieving status as a “school-wide program” (SWP). A school can attain SWP status by developing a comprehensive academic improvement plan so that all students, especially those farthest from achieving proficiency, will meet state academic standards. Once designated SWP, a school can consolidate federal, state, and local funds to reform the school's entire education program. Title I directs funding for reading and early reading programs, improving school libraries, children of migratory farm workers, comprehensive school reform, advanced placement, and dropout prevention. Funds are currently used for programs such as Head Start, Federal Pell Grants, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities, and State Grants for Innovative Programs.

For the text and official statements about Title I, see: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/titlei-parti/index.htm>

For a helpful guide to SWP designation, see: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/rt/>

### **Leadership**

Most successful PK-3 systems have been guided by strong leadership at the district and/or school level. These leaders tend to have prior experience in the classroom with young children. They play important roles in breaking down the walls between the different program and funding silos, forging a common and cohesive staff culture, and allocating resources in ways that support an aligned system.

### **Student Assessment**

Assessment is a hot button issue in some communities. No universal assessment currently exists for children entering kindergarten, and there are still many questions around what, how and when to assess children's learning. Some parents want their kids assessed at an early age, and others don't. In some communities there are cultural issues around testing, with the perception that assessments are Eurocentric and imply that there's an ideal all children should match. Some parents are against producing any record by which their children can be tracked.

### **Cultural Responsiveness and Competence**

Cultural responsiveness is an important element of the PK-3 approach that is rarely addressed adequately. Although research shows that it's important for children to see adults of their same ethnic or racial background, teacher demographics rarely match student demographics within a school. Research has also shown cultural continuity to be important in children's language development.

### **Creating a Cohesive System**

Although we describe K-12 education as one system, elementary, middle and high school levels tend to function as silos, working in isolation. In some schools, kindergarten is considered separate from the rest of the elementary grades. Pre-K typically functions as its own independent and very separate system, even when it is provided onsite. It is not uncommon for schools to require their onsite pre-K students to re-enroll when entering kindergarten. These factors create the challenge of having to integrate and align different systems. Breaking down these silos and opening up communication is one of the big challenges in creating a cohesive PK-3 system.

"Pre-K is not well connected with Kindergarten, and Kindergarten is often not well integrated with grades one through three. All have their own cultures and their own silos; so you're dealing with three different worlds or cultures: Pre-K, Kindergarten, and elementary education. PK-3 connects them into a learning continuum." —Ruby Takanishi, Foundation for Child Development

## PK-3 Challenges and Opportunities

A group discussion by funders reflecting on the challenges of a PK-3 approach to education identified some very clear and actionable

opportunities for establishing and sustaining a PK-3 system. In the following table, the opportunities identified are not limited to the purview of funders, and also apply to leaders or advocates working to establish PK-3 systems.

### CHALLENGE

Private sector pre-K providers are wary of or uninterested in working with public schools.

Principals and superintendents don't see pre-K as being in their purview.

Principals resist creating a PK-3 system.

A PK-3 program has to compete with other programs for resources and prioritization as administrations come and go.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS, LEADERS OR ADVOCATES

Bridging the gap takes a relationship—develop it. Invite providers to meet the principal, teachers and other K-3 staff. Get to know the providers and make them feel like an important part of creating an exciting PK-3 system.

Begin the change by aligning pre-K and kindergarten first, then connect them with 1-3. Use the term “PK-3” regularly in communications with principals or superintendents. Work to create policies that encourage superintendents and principals to include pre-K in their districts and schools.

Contact the superintendent to get buy-in and to persuade the principal. Acknowledge that the principal can't do it alone. Facilitate relationship building with community organizations that can help. Assist in developing a teacher leader who can help coordinate PK-3 alignment so the principal is not taking on new work.

Make the case for the PK-3 approach to every new administration. Ensure that school board members make the PK-3 program a priority.

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## CHALLENGE

Formal and informal pre-K providers tend to have different levels of knowledge and expertise in early childhood development.

The school principal is worried about how to fund a PK-3 program.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS, LEADERS OR ADVOCATES

Raise the bar for everyone by helping providers enhance their ability to provide quality pre-K. Work with formal providers to educate parents about school readiness and quality pre-K.

Educate the principal and the superintendent about Title I funding flexibility and other sources of state and federal funding. Ask the superintendent to work with the school board to identify how much Title I funding can be dedicated to PK-3 programs.

## PERSHING EAST ELEMENTARY

When you first enter Pershing East Elementary, you are awash in the warm colors of student artwork and the inviting décor. As you move through the hallways, evidence of student achievement is everywhere—outside of every classroom, book reports, essays, math problems and artwork are posted on the walls. In every classroom you find alphabet posters, a library of books, class rules that revolve around respect for fellow students, and posters for identifying emotions. You get a sense that children are celebrated and cared for here, and that their achievement and success is foremost. It's clear that when Principal Volk says, "The focus here is on the kids, not on the adults," she means it.

Meeting participants were taken to see the PK-3 approach in action at this recently converted PK-3 school. Located in a low-income community on Chicago's South Side, Pershing East switched to a PK-3 model with full-day kindergarten in the 2005-2006 school year. Originally, the school accommodated kindergarten through eighth grade, until demand exceeded the site's capacity. Under the guidance of Principal Kay Volk, pre-K was integrated to create an aligned PK-3 system, and grades four through eight were moved one block away to a building now called "Pershing West."

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**Reading as a common focus**

Reading is an integral part of Pershing East's PK-3 program. Every class has its own library and children participate daily in "read alouds." When staff get together, they start with a read-aloud to identify good books and find those that meet the needs of their students. The principal starts every meeting with a read aloud to send the message to staff that reading is a priority. The district has supported this focus by providing Pershing East a reading specialist who can assist students and teachers.

Pershing East has successfully woven the importance of reading into all that is done, and as an inherent part of every day, reading for pleasure has become natural to the young students.

**Making school a place like home**

When Pershing East became a PK-3 school, staff and parents cleaned and painted the entire building with warmer colors to create a more welcoming environment. Throughout the school, children's work lines the walls. The students are proud to have their accomplishments shown, and reportedly don't damage or take down anything that is posted. Both children and parents have found the environment safe and welcoming.

**Parents can call it home**

Volk describes how "kids love to have parents here and parents love to come." She has welcomed parents into the school, and made them an integral part of the PK-3 experience. One parent helped paint the school prior to its opening as a PK-3 model, and he continues to

come to read to his child in the classroom and to help out with maintenance of the school grounds. Parents sense that Pershing East is family friendly, and that they can drop in and will be accepted.

**A teaching family**

Teachers work together closely at Pershing. They collaborate on school-wide projects, and describe their environment as "flowing and productive". "It's really like a family, with everyone praising each other and working together," said one.

This open and collaborative environment makes their own growth and learning possible. According to Principal Volk, "Our culture is humble and accepts mistakes. You need to identify them to improve them." Professional development is an integral part of Volk's strategy for providing the highest quality education to her students. Teachers start the year with a week of professional development before classes begin. During the school year teachers are offered regular after-school training. Data is collected on all students and shared with teachers to identify trends in individual classrooms. This is not a punitive measure, but designed to elicit conversation among teachers about improving instructional practice.

**Addressing the needs of learners**

If a child has a problem in the classroom, Pershing East teachers have a special education specialist come into the classroom to observe. The classroom teacher and specialist

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work together to figure out the source of the child's difficulty. Different teaching strategies are tried to see if anything is sparked or improved, and to identify the child's unique learning style. This model provides teachers and students with the support they need, and eliminates having a "special education dumping ground."

#### **Aligning takes time**

Only one year into launching the PK-3 program, the school is still struggling with some issues around alignment, such as finding the right balance between academic and developmental activities. Head Start is a play-based program, which Principal Volk has structured to include learning around language and numbers.

Teachers are finding vertical alignment challenging. Teachers are looking at outcomes, and working to get to a place where expectations are known for the children coming into and leaving the particular grade they teach.

Despite the struggles, when anyone looks at a number of classrooms, they can see the similarities across environments: libraries, an emphasis on literacy and numbers, tools for children to identify their emotions and children's work on the walls, to name a few. And, each morning in every classroom across the school, there is a period of time dedicated to reading.

#### **A blended funding model**

Pershing East operates on a blended funding model. In addition to Title I funds, Pershing East receives Head Start money for low-income students and offers tuition-based pre-K for other children. Although funding may come from separate sources, all children, Head Start or not, are taught together in a single program. Principal Volk realized the burden of paper work was too much for the teachers, so she acquired a support person from the district's central office to assist, allowing the teachers to focus on the most important thing: the children.

## A PK-3 PROGRAM IN THE LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Although Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) in California is the third-poorest district in California, it has managed to beat some of the odds, in part as a result of a fully aligned PK-12 system. Fifty percent of elementary schools have pre-K in their classrooms, while the others meet regularly with providers who teach in rooms and buildings throughout the community, paid for by the district. Today, Superintendent Chris Steinhauser is struggling to find enough money to fund additional Advanced Placement high school teachers because of an increased demand that he claims is the result of integrating pre-K into the K-12 system, thereby boosting student achievement.

As is common in most efforts to align a PK-3 system, teachers had extended discussions about developing age-appropriate standards that adequately balance academic and developmental learning. As a result of these discussions, the district developed a handout for parents outlining district-wide standards for entry into kindergarten. Teachers and parents are now using the same language to talk about school readiness. Steinhauser says that in developing the standards, “The key was delivery. We didn’t want kids just sitting at desks doing pencil tasks.”

Steinhauser emphasizes the need to provide adequate support to teachers and principals implementing the PK-3 program. “I ask principals, ‘How can I make your job better?’

but I’m also the mean guy where I have the ‘friendly’ conversations and tell teachers they have to do better.” To support the implementation of a PK-3 approach, a system has been established in which lead teachers help coordinate pre-K alignment, a literacy specialist is available to assist at each school, and 10 to 12 literacy coaches work with teachers throughout the district. Additionally, half of each monthly principals’ meeting is devoted to discussing and improving instructional practices.

Children get the support they need as well. According to Steinhauser, “It’s all about doing the right thing [for kids].” And what’s right is making sure they succeed. The district’s retention policy starts in kindergarten whereby teachers look regularly at children’s assessments to stay on top of how they are learning and developing. Every six weeks, teachers look at the six lowest students in pre-K, and together determine what interventions they’ll implement to help get those students up to speed.

Some parents receive support, too—with a caveat. Parents of PK-3 students can participate in an ESL tutoring program, in exchange for tutoring in their child’s classroom. This program has been an effective means of getting parents involved in their children’s education.

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While retention policies can help keep kids in school, getting them there in the first place can be a challenge. Kindergarten isn't mandated in California, and in many schools it's only a half-day long. To help spread the word about Long Beach's full-day kindergarten program and encourage attendance, the district developed a kindergarten festival that brought parents, as well as pre-K providers, into the classroom for an introduction.

### **Funding a District-Wide PK-3 Program**

Funding a district-wide PK-3 system was an initial challenge, but Steinhauser understands its importance. "When you invest in pre-K, it's not just going to affect those [ages], it's going to affect the whole system." Working with a district-staffed financial expert, Steinhauser found a way to fund the PK-3 program with a variety of sources. Using a flexible funding model, excess Title I funds, which make up the bulk of the funding, are moved to the PK-3 program and others that need it. This mobility of funding has proven valuable. While other schools with budget gaps have had to let teachers go, Long Beach has been lucky. According to Steinhauser, he's had to cut "\$41 million dollars, but kept all teachers, and cut central office staff by 40."

In an environment where budget deficits are an ongoing concern, many principals fall prey

to a hoarding mentality and don't use all the funds they're given by the district. For this reason, Steinhauser reviews school budgets regularly and redistributes flexible dollars where they are needed. After a recent review, he had more than \$4 million in unspent state and federal funds, which he re-appropriated. Districts often have more funding than they realize—they may simply not know where to look.

Foundation grants have helped fund Long Beach's effort to implement its PK-3 system. He believes foundations can encourage additional public-private partnerships by challenging school grantees to go out and obtain matching funds as a contingency of foundation funding. He challenges his own schools to do the same.

Steinhauser has developed a strong relationship with his program officer. He believes that school grantees, including himself, should be held accountable. "What I ask of you is to ask those hard questions of us. My program officer is the most critical friend I have. He has a comfort zone to come to me and say, 'We have this charge, how are we going to do it? It's your responsibility.'" In part, it's this relationship that has pushed him to make the PK-3 approach work in Long Beach.

# III. Opportunities for Grantmakers

Grantmakers can play a variety of roles in supporting and advancing PK-3 programs. The potential activities in which they can engage go beyond making grants to schools to include convening, advocating for policy change, brokering relationships and much more. At the briefing, grantmakers and PK-3 practitioners identified a number of points of entry for grantmakers.

## Funding Approaches

Throughout the briefing, grantmakers shared the variety of approaches they've taken to fund and support PK-3 programs. The following funding strategies range from specific to general funding approaches to increase impact.

### **Provide seed funding to support sustainability**

Establishing a fully-aligned PK-3 system can take up to 10 years. What will happen when it's up and running and the funder leaves? Instead of underwriting a school or district effort, provide seed funding and help identify long-term funding solutions, such as a plan for redistributing federal and state sources of funding. Grants as small as \$5,000 can seed a small project or initiative that would get the ball rolling.

### **Facilitate the replication of success**

Success should be replicated, but people on the ground usually don't have the means or time to get the word out on how it should be done. Build networks and convene meetings around successful PK-3 models in your community so others can learn about them. Support schools,

districts and organizations that want to replicate successful models.

### **Fund advocacy efforts**

The on-the-ground work of building a PK-3 system is more expensive than impacting public policy by educating the public and legislators about the value of pre-K and PK-3 programs. One of the clearest paths to scaling up PK-3 systems is to enact policies supporting it. Public advocacy and education are key to overcoming some of the misconceptions about and increasing public awareness of the PK-3 approach. Fund advocacy organizations, public policy forums and other activities that will help advance policy change.

### **Train pre-K directors to be advocates**

Train pre-K directors to advocate for policy change. Teach them the importance of moving PK-3 programs forward, and how to talk about and advocate for it with legislators. Connect them with local and state advocacy organizations, and other key stakeholders they can leverage for greater effect, such as churches, community organizations and parent groups.

### **Fund collaboratively**

Collaborating with other foundations is an effective way to maximize resources for greater impact. Reach out to grantmakers at local, state and national levels, and propose working together if your foundation can't achieve its desired outcome alone. Early learning grantmakers should collaborate with K-12 grantmakers to ensure a quality continuum of learning from pre-K through 12th grade. Funding for fourth grade and above is critical to sustaining the gains made by PK-3 systems.



**Fund and facilitate the growth of community efforts**

Grantmakers can help build a sustainable PK-3 system by bringing together and funding community players who drive PK-3 programs in their school or district, and the organizations that support and sustain the system, such as those offering professional development or social services. This community-focused approach to funding a PK-3 program can increase community buy-in and sustainability.

**Collaborate with or provide assistance to colleges of education**

The colleges of education in this country are key to increasing the pool of qualified teachers, especially teachers of color, for PK-3 education. Their curricula should address the importance of early learning, as well as working with children of color. Collaborate or fund efforts to expand or improve the quality of their programs centered on early learning.

**Fund capital improvements**

Many schools need financial support for making physical improvements, such as new buildings or a redesign of existing spaces to accommodate PK-3 programs. Because costs are often prohibitive, many schools will align with offsite pre-K providers instead. Fund capital improvements to help ensure onsite pre-K.

**Convene and educate school and community players to create buy-in.**

Communities may need to be educated about the PK-3 approach before they consider investing in and implementing it. Convene school and community players, including principals, teachers, higher education, the childcare community, parents, and cultural and community groups to discuss the PK-3 approach and how it can serve everyone's interests.

## IV. What's Needed in the Future

The goal of PK-3 advocates, including most PK-3 grantmakers, is for the PK-3 approach to become an integral part of a PK-16 U.S. education system. Meeting participants shared ideas about what would be helpful to them and to the PK-3 movement in achieving this goal.

### **PK-3 Toolkit on Implementation**

The briefing only touched on how quality PK-3 education is implemented. A report that outlines how to implement PK-3 would be a valuable tool for grantmakers and school and/or district leaders.

### **Opportunities for Continued Online Discussion**

Not everyone involved in PK-3 programs has the time or resources to meet in person to discuss challenges and best practices. Online discussion boards or chat rooms for grantmakers to share their experiences and successes, as well as for grantees to weigh in on the key issues of implementing a PK-3 approach, would help create a national network of practice.

### **Communications Strategies and Tools**

Briefing participants have found that making the case for PK-3 is imperative, but different messages are successful with different audiences. For some audiences, the high return on investment in PK-3 is unimpressive and bounces off, while for others it is the golden key. Grantmakers agree that if PK-3 is to be brought to full scale, communications strategies and tools must be a part of the effort.

### **Public Advocacy Campaign**

It was suggested that for PK-3 to really take hold throughout the country, a public advocacy campaign, like the anti-smoking campaign, is needed to drive public will.

### **Grantmaking Opportunities to Advance PK-3 Programs**

Following is a list of ideas for how funders can support the alignment of pre-K programs with early elementary education.

#### **Policy**

- Support federal and state-level policy changes that include pre-K with K-12 education and consider pre-K education on the same level as K-12 education, perhaps best exemplified by the State of Oklahoma.
- Work to include pre-K as part of federal legislation in NCLB, Title I, IDEA, and Higher Education Reauthorization, providing greater flexibility and impetus for using these federal funds to support aligned PK-3.
- Support state-based efforts to align early learning standards with K-12 learning standards and vice versa, and the connection of these standards to curriculum, instruction, and assessment from pre-K through grade 12.

#### **Implementation and Professional Development**

- Support efforts to address resource inequalities between schools serving middle-class and low-income communities.

- Ensure that all efforts are responsive to the needs of children who are low-income and/or from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds.
- Support efforts to raise the quality of instruction and teacher preparation across the PK-3 span to a higher, more consistent level.
- Support peer-to-peer learning about PK-3 implementation challenges across sites.
- Support professional development opportunities and time for principals to learn more about pre-K programs, developmentally appropriate curricula and instructional methods and assessment so that they can lead PK-3 efforts in their schools. Document these efforts so that they can inform efforts in other places.
- Support professional development time for PK-3 teachers to work together to align the educational and learning experiences of their young students.
- Support the development of teacher education programs that prepare teachers to work with children from ages three to eight.

### **Technical Assistance**

- Describe structural and staffing options for PK-3 approaches within existing PK-5 or PK-8 schools.
- Describe models for connecting schools with community-based pre-K and K programs.
- Describe models for connecting elementary schools with pre-K programs on school grounds.
- Develop web-based TA resources for schools, principals, teachers and policymakers around PK-3 issues, including implementation.
- Provide profiles of PK-3 schools to illustrate the variety of approaches taken to adapt to local conditions, including sample day schedules, and personnel deployment.
- Describe how PK-3 schools align standards, curriculum, instructional strategies and assessment from both school and district perspectives.
- Produce a directory of private and corporate funders interested in the PK-3 approach.
- Catalogue samples of aligned curriculum frameworks within and across grades.

### **Research and Evaluation**

- Develop a library of research studies related to the PK-3 approach.
- Support research and evaluation studies to test the effectiveness of PK-3 programs.
- Develop templates adaptable to local sites for evaluating PK-3 schools.
- Support case studies of schools, districts, and states that document the challenges and trials of implementing PK-3 programs (e.g., Miami Dade Public Schools, Hawaii, Georgia).
- Support research to understand PK-3 efforts and use findings to improve these efforts for the future.

### **Strategic Communications**

- Work to identify frames and messages for effectively communicating the PK-3 approach and why it is important in reducing the achievement gap and increasing life prospects of children, especially children at risk for educational underperformance. Key audiences include policymakers, educational professionals, and the media.

### **Creation of Networks**

- Create PK-3 learning community of grant-makers in GFE.
- Create a network of PK-3 implementers to share resources and experiences, starting informally and possibly formalizing into an organization.
- Initiate an annual PK-3 conference.

## RESOURCES

### **Grantmakers for Education**

The GFE Knowledge Center includes links to a collection of PK-3 publications and also features presentations and supporting documents from the May, 2006 program. GFE members can access the site by logging in, and then visiting GFE communities > GFE programs > member briefing: PK-3 alignment.

### **Principals Lead The Way For PK-3: Early Investment, Strong Alignment, Better Results**

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) interviewed principals across the country who are leading efforts to build strong PK-3 programs. The result is more than 20 case studies. <http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1928>

### **School of the 21st Century**

Based at Yale University, the “21C” program develops, researches, networks and supervises a revolutionary educational model that links communities, families and schools, and which begins at the pre-kindergarten level. There are currently over 1300 21C schools across the United States. <http://www.yale.edu/21C/index2.html>

### **National Institute for Early Education**

**Research (NIEER)** NIEER supports early childhood education initiatives by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. <http://nieer.org/>

### **The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)**

NAEYC is dedicated to improving the well-being of all young children, with particular focus on the quality of educational and developmental services for all children from birth through age 8. To help achieve its goals of facilitating professional development and public understanding of early childhood education, NAEYC identifies and addresses the issues that shape the field, and offers numerous publications and resources. <http://www.naeyc.org/>

### **Foundation for Child Development (FCD)**

FCD is a national, private philanthropy dedicated to the principle that all families should have the social and material resources to raise their children to be healthy, educated and productive members of their communities. A significant portion of its work is focused on PK-3. FCD’s website is a valuable PK-3 resource, with everything you need to know about PK-3 and links to relevant publications. <http://www.fcd-us.org>



Grantmakers for Education improves the knowledge, networks and effectiveness of education philanthropy. By connecting effective education strategies with effective grantmaking strategies, we help foundations and donors leverage their investments to improve achievement and opportunities for all students. Founded in 1995, we are a national association of over 250 philanthropies that connects grantmakers with knowledgeable leaders, promising programs, experienced colleagues and actionable research.